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The
American Historical Review

THE FRENCH REFORMATION AND THE FRENCH
PEOPLE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

THE Reformation had the two-fold character of a social and of a religious revolution. It was not solely against doctrinal corruptions and against ecclesiastical abuses, but also against misery and iniquity that the lower classes rebelled; they sought in the Bible not only for the doctrine of salvation by grace, but for proofs of the primitive equality of all men.

“When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then the gentleman?”

In Germany the works of Janssen have shown the immense part played in the Reformation by the peasants' revolts. It was poor Conrad, “*der arme Kunz*,” who gave the victory to Luther, despite the anathema which the Saxon monk pronounced upon that troublesome ally. In England it is a commonplace to say with Thorold Rogers that the strength of the Reformation was due “to the secret Lollardry, which seemed to be extinguished and was so active,” and that “the Puritan movement was essentially and originally one of the middle classes, of the traders in the towns, of the farmers in the country.”¹

I.

Did matters take another course in France? Our historians usually see in the Huguenot party above all else a party of noblemen. They think that the aristocracy preferred the rigidity of Protestantism to the pomp of the Roman Church; and that if the new religion did not triumph in France, it was because it could get no hold upon the popular classes.² Yet Michelet had said: “In the

¹ *The Economic Interpretation of History*, p. 84. See also Taine, *Hist. de la Littérature Anglaise*, II. 301.

² Aug. Thierry, *Hist. du Tiers État*, p. 111. Mignet, *Essais*, pp. 256–262.

sixteenth century at Meaux . . . was kindled the first spark in the religious revolution.”¹ He observed also that in Crespin’s martyrology one finds “but three nobles in forty years (1515–1555); . . . the others are generally poor workmen, burgesses and merchants.”² An American writer, who has thrown a vivid light upon this portion of French history, Professor Henry M. Baird, remarked more recently that Louis de Berquin, executed so late as 1528, was the first in date, amongst the “martyrs,” who was a “man of quality.”³ He mentions the indignant surprise shown by Henry II. in 1558 on hearing that the Chastillons, who belonged to the aristocracy, had embraced a religion fit only for low people.⁴ In 1561, the Venetian envoy Giovanni Michiel wrote: “Till now, owing to the severity of the tortures, none have been seen to come forward but common people who, besides their lives, had not much to lose” . . .⁵ Does not the Catholic historian Florimond Raemond say that the first adherents of the new doctrine were “a few poor, simple men, . . . working men,” and “even such as had never done aught but handle the plough and dig the ground?”⁶ He rails with bitter irony at those men of low degree, ignorant, illiterate, who “at a moment’s notice become excellent theologians.” But is not this very banter an involuntary admission of the fact that amongst these “wretched penny-earners” the Reformation found its first partisans?

An indirect proof of this affirmation lies in the very means which the new doctrine employed in its propagation. If its hold had been merely upon a public composed of men of letters and scholars it would have continued to publish long tracts in Latin, as Le Febvre d’Étaples had begun to do. Had it relied for support mainly upon the nobility it would have spoken in its sermons and books the polished language of the court. Now, what do we see in fact? As early as 1525 the bishop of Meaux is reproached for having distributed in his diocese “books in French which were all error and heresy.”⁷ The translation of the Bible happening to be one of them, these early heretics obtained the nickname of “Biblians.” We find, too, an ever-increasing number of pamphlets for the people, such as “*Alphabets for the simple and rude*,”⁸ wherein, under pretext of

¹ *Histoire de France* (ed. 1876), X. 155.

² *Ibid.*, p. 337; and XI. 74, 78.

³ *History of the Rise of the Huguenots*, I. 318.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Relazioni degli Ambasciatori Veneti in Francia*, III. 425.

⁶ *Histoire... de l’Hérésie de ce Siècle*, Rouen, 1623, pp. 845, 851, 871–873.

⁷ S. Berger, *Procès de Briçonnet* (in *Bulletin Historique du Protestantisme Français*, 15 jan., 1895).

⁸ *Alphabet ou Institution Chrestienne* . . . Lyons, 1558.

teaching the children the rudiments of reading, they are initiated into the doctrine of grace ; translations of the minor tracts of Luther ;¹ collections of Protestant prayers. Thousands of these little books were issued by the clandestine presses of Meaux and Alençon, by the Protestant presses of Lyons and Geneva. Although they were not infrequently burned with their owners, many of them are to be found in our libraries. These little books found their way into the peddler's pack, under the trinkets and sweets, and were thus circulated from village to village ; more than one peddler paid with his life for the guilt of having transported those forbidden wares. In a barn, at night, by the dim light of the candle—for they must not raise suspicion—or by daylight in the forest glade, at the "*école buissonnière*," the illiterate gathered around him who could read. He was a vicar or a monk, brought over to the new ideas, or sometimes a schoolmaster or a lawyer, barrister, proctor or notary ; he would read, and around him hardheaded peasants, the women that span, the children with large, wondering eyes, muttered inwardly the strong words of the Bible, or the exhortations of the theologian ; from that day, in some obscure corner of "the most Christian Kingdom," a Protestant community was born.

But the book is not enough for the popular mind ; the people in France are fond of singing while they work. All those who were unable to read—and such was then the case with nearly all Frenchmen of the lower classes—would ponder within themselves on what they had heard read by the learned man of the village or of their quarter of the town. All day long, while driving the plough "o'er the furrowed land" or throwing the shuttle at the loom, they would repeat over again, under their breath, the words that had most deeply impressed them ; those words caught the very rhythm of their labor, and a song would shape itself upon their lips. The existence of a vast literature of Huguenot songs would alone suffice to prove the existence of a popular Protestantism ; for those songs, such are their words, style and rhythm, can only have been written for the common people and sung by them.²

How is it that the contrary opinion still prevails ? Why is the statement constantly repeated in France that the French Reformation was an aristocratic movement ? At most it is conceded—because it is too strikingly obvious to be denied—that the burghers of the towns, the lawyers and the masters of crafts played an important part in it. But why is the part played by the popular classes ignored ? There are three reasons :

¹ Weiss, *Bull. du Protest. Franç.*, 1887, p. 664 ; 1888, pp. 155, 432, 500.

² Bordier, *Chansonnier Huguenot*, I. pp. xiv, xxviii ; Montaiglon, *Recueil des Poésies Françaises* ; Le Roux de Lincy, *Chants Historiques Français*.

First, it is usual to study the Reformation after 1560 only, at the time, that is, when it almost ceases to be a religious revolution and becomes a political party ; and then, indeed, it is, so to speak, captured by the gentry ;

Secondly, the Catholics are loath to recognize in the French Reformation a popular movement, for to do so would invest it with additional importance, would amount to a confession that it was deeply rooted in the national soil, and would make it in the future impossible to regard it as a foreign importation, a superficial or factitious growth ;

Thirdly, the Protestants are upon this point at one with the Catholics,¹ for a kind of shame hinders them from conceding that the Reformation was a social revolution ; they would see in it a purely intellectual, spiritual movement ; they put aside all the impure, blind, violent, sometimes criminal elements which the intervention of the mob introduces into every revolution ; in their view, ideas alone were at work in the Reformation, the interests and passions had no part.

II.

M. Hanotaux, after studying in his well-known *Histoire du Cardinal de Richelieu* the social state of the French workmen at the beginning of the seventeenth century, notes with perfect justice "the rapidity with which the working classes gave in their adherence to the Reformation."² It is, indeed, in the situation of this class that we shall find the cause of its attitude towards the religious innovations.

That situation was by no means enviable. The discovery of gold and silver mines, increasing considerably the stock of the precious metals in Europe, had caused a rise in the price of the necessities of life ; and the wages of the workmen were far from rising in the same proportion. The guild system, which in the thirteenth century had been the protection of the weak, was tending more and more to become oppressively oligarchical ; the management of manufactures became the monopoly of a rich, and in fact, hereditary caste. It was nearly impossible for a simple workman who was not a master's son nor supplied with capital to rise to the mastership. Conflicts between labor and capital were therefore frequent : combinations of the "companions" to obtain higher wages or better food ; combinations of the "masters," who wished to control the labor market ; and this in spite of the royal edicts that positively suppressed the

¹ I must except some of them, especially Mons. N. Weiss.

² I. 473. See Levasseur, *Histoire des Classes Ouvrières*, II. *passim*.

right of combination. The struggle between the employers' unions and those of the workingmen often ended in strikes; for instance, that great strike which, raging from 1539 to 1542, ruined the printing trade in Lyons and Paris and was not really appeased until 1571.¹

The workers' world was therefore a dissatisfied and turbulent one, eager for novelties, extremely apt to listen to revolutionary preaching. The development of French industries had drawn to France many foreign workmen, Flemish, Italian and especially German, who brought along with them foreign ideas. Moreover, the social agitation, especially in the great and mystical city of Lyons, was oftentimes mixed with religious agitation. For instance, at Lyons in 1529 the people rebelled on account of the extraordinary rise in the price of corn. They besieged and plundered the houses of the *consuls* (town councillors), whom they declared responsible for the famine; but they took care to destroy the statues of the saints with which one of these houses was adorned, while they spared the statues of the great men of antiquity, and the whole rising bears a strange religious character, as it were a revival of the old "Poor Men of Lyons."²

But long before this date the Reformed creeds had struck root among the working classes. At Meaux in 1525 Gerard Roussel had for his auditors the woolcombers, the carders, the fullers and drapers, drapery being the great industry of the town. One of these fullers was to be next year, at Metz in Lorraine, the first martyr of the French Reformation. The prelates, as Briçonnet, the scholars, the gentlemen, dared not offer their lives as a sacrifice for the new doctrine; but the humble worker, "ignorant in letters," would proclaim his faith at the stake. In 1528 a boatman of the Seine was executed at Paris, in 1531 some linen-weavers at Valenciennes. Above all, in the great persecution of 1534-1535, after the posting of the placards against the mass in the very room of the King, many names of workmen can be quoted.³ First, it is a shoemaker's son, the young paralytic Barthélemy Mollon; in his father's shop the poor cripple, while plying the awl, would read secretly the forbidden books; he explained them to his fellow-workmen, wherefore they had surnamed him "the Evangelist." Next it is a weaver, a hosier, a young dyer, a tailor, a shoemaker, a joiner, two ribbon-weavers. In the Limousin, some artisans coming from Flanders and Germany seem to have spread heresy among the industrious

¹ Hauser in the *Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, 1894, 1895, 1898.

² Hauser, *Revue Historique*, 1896.

³ *Bourgeois de Paris*, pp. 441-451; *Chronique de François Ier*, pp. 111-136; *Bull. du Protest.*, XI. 252.

population of Aubusson and Felletin.¹ At Le Puy-en-Velay, an eminently Catholic township, renowned throughout all Europe for its pilgrimage of the Virgin, a Catholic chronicler writes in 1539 that three-fourths of the people are tainted.² No doubt his estimate is too high, but he would not have thought of putting it thus if there had not been among the lower classes, as a matter of fact, a large Protestant group. At Bordeaux two artisans were burnt alive in 1541.³

Notwithstanding the persecutions of 1525-1526, the seed had persistently sprung up among the working classes at Meaux. It appeared clearly in 1545-1546 during the investigation preliminary to the trial which resulted in the execution of the Fourteen and of which Mr. Bower has given us so engaging a narrative.⁴ Upon the list of the fifty-seven suspects one reads none but plebeian names, and the world of carders and weavers again furnishes to the Inquisition its victims. A proof that the ranks of the dissenters were recruited chiefly from among them is that after 1546 the cloth trade of Meaux, hitherto prosperous, was ruined. M. N. Weiss has published under the title *La Chambre Ardente*⁵ the trials for heresy conducted by the Parliament of Paris in 1547, 1548 and 1549. Here again, the names are nearly always plebeian. The occupation of the accused is generally stated; they are, for the most part, weavers, fullers, shoemakers and cobblers, glaziers, bookbinders, hosiers, servants and chambermaids, locksmiths, coopers, tailors, pastry-cooks, joiners, peddlers, pewterers, masons, hatters, etc. All crafts are represented.

Bernard Palissy, "the potter of Saintonge," belonged to this class, and he has left us an account of what would take place. A poor artisan of Saintes preaches "the Gospel" to ten of his fellows. Six of them agree to preach on Sundays, each taking his turn once in six weeks; and being very ignorant they write their sermons beforehand, with the help of an ex-priest who has turned printer, and they read them. "Such was the beginning of the Reformed Church in the town of Saintes."⁶ It is a church of poor people; when they get a minister they cannot maintain him, "as there were few rich men in our congregation, and we could not afford to pay him his wages." But if money was scarce, their hearts were in the cause,

¹ A. Leroux, *Hist. de la Réforme dans la Marche et le Limousin*, p. 5.

² Estienne Médicis, *Chronique du Puy*, p. 502. He is here speaking of the French people in general. But he mentions heretics at Le Puy, pp. 387, 509-513.

³ Gaullieur, *Hist. du Parlement de Bordeaux*, I. 57.

⁴ *The Fourteen of Meaux*, London and New York, 1894.

⁵ Paris, 1889.

⁶ *Bull. du Protest.*, I. 83-93.

and on Sundays the journeymen would stroll about the country in troops singing psalms.

In truth, the transformation of these primitive congregations into regularly constituted churches, on the model (especially after 1550) of that of Geneva, did not immediately alter their frankly democratic character. When an inquiry was set on foot, in 1562, against the church of Beauvais, it was ascertained that for three years that church had had for its members drapers and woolcombers.¹ At Rouen, in 1560, the labor-party has become identified with the Reformed party; the cloth merchants, *i. e.*, the capitalists, actually proclaimed a lock-out against the workmen that attended the preachings. A truly revolutionary agitation fermented in that great industrial city, and presently found a vent for itself, as at La Rochelle, in the breaking of holy images.² At Nîmes a locksmith, a gardener, weavers, a carder, a coppersmith, a huckster, chambermaids are persecuted; at Issoire in Auvergne a cobbler, tailors, masons, bakers;³ at Le Puy, 1561, hosiers, cutlers, dyers, millers. Even at a later date this often is the case; in 1561, at Cambray, cambric-weavers, hosiers, shoemakers, etc., are examined.⁴

When religious persecutions threaten, the working classes emigrate. Nothing binds them to the land. A few tools and his two arms constitute all the capital of the workman; he carries them into countries where he can worship God in his own way and in his own speech. The ruin of French industries in the second half of the century is, for the most part, to be thus explained.⁵ We have already seen that no cloth-trade is left at Meaux after the trial of the Fourteen. The production of the Paris dye-works falls off by four-fifths; Amiens weaves no more; Lyons has but eighteen hundred silk looms instead of seven thousand, and printing is decaying there. It is an earlier manifestation of the phenomenon which was to follow the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the transferring of French industries to foreign lands. Montchrestien, an exile in England, works in a cutlery-house, where he meets French refugees. "England," says he, "has been so well taught by the skill of our men who have fled there for safety as to a harbor of refuge, that now she practises with glory and profit those same arts that we had long kept as our own."⁶ . . . In the cloth manufactory of Hamp-

¹ *Bull. du Protest.*, XXIII. 73.

² *Hist. Eccl's. des Églises Réf.*, I. 310.

³ Puech, *Renaissance et Réforme à Nîmes*, p. 152; Bouillet, *Annales d'Issoire*.

⁴ *Bull. du Protest.*, III. 255.

⁵ Smiles, *Huguenots in England*; Levasseur, *Hist. des Classes Ouvrières*, II.

⁶ *Traité de l'Économie Politique* (ed. by Funck-Brentano, 1889), pp. 48, 68; Laffemas, *Règlement Général* . . . 1597, p. 20.

ton (Middlesex) he was "much surprised to hear, in almost every workshop, nothing but the French tongue." And even if poverty, the inevitable outcome of civil war, had driven out of France workmen of all persuasions, yet none but Reformed people appear among the French refugees entered upon the books of Lausanne from 1547 to 1574.¹ Among them the craftsmen are very numerous, and they come from every part of France; for instance a gunsmith from St. Étienne-en-Forez, a baker from the Tardenois, a shoemaker from the Velay, a pewterer from Flanders, a joiner from Joinville in Champagne, a cutler from Annecy in Savoy, etc.

The Venetian Contarini was therefore quite right when he wrote in 1572, "That sect consists for the most part of craftsmen, as cobblers, tailors, and such ignorant people. . . ."²

III.

It is not to be denied that the new religious tenets spread far more slowly and found much less favor among the country-folk than among the townspeople. The reason for this is, first, a social one: while the revolution of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was ruinous for the artisan, it was profitable to the peasant.³ The rent paid to the landlord, immutably fixed in the twelfth or thirteenth century, represented under the new values of money a very light burden, while the fall in the price of silver considerably raised the nominal worth of the products of the soil, when the villein sold them. The price of land was falling rapidly at the very time when the French gentry, ceasing to be an aristocracy of gentlemen-farmers and becoming a court-nobility, were compelled to sell their estates to meet their expenses and, as was said, "to put their mills and meadows on their shoulders." When a lord wished to sell at any price a part of his estates, there was always, in the parish, a countryman who had been, as one may say, saving money for centuries, and who, realizing at last the dream of bygone generations, bought land. Thus did the French villein become a landowner. The reign of Louis XII. and the beginning of that of Francis I. was for the French countryman an epoch of real prosperity; his situation presented a striking contrast with that of the German countryman, who, at the same date, was in danger of relapsing into bondage. We may easily understand why there was not in France, as in Germany, a peasants' revolution both social and religious.

The countryman, as he appears to us in the literature of that

¹ *Bull. du Protest.*, XXI. 463-478.

² *Relazioni*, IV. 242.

³ D'Avenel, *Hist. Économique de la Propriété*, . . . I. 92 et *passim*.

time, for instance in the *Propos Rustiques* of Noël du Fail, is a being who acts by routine, with a mind not easily open to new ideas, less accessible, therefore, than that of the turbulent craftsmen to the great currents of the time. He sticks to his old superstitions, whose root lies in the ancient Gallic heathenism, and which the Church has known how to transmute and to appropriate to its own purposes; he reveres the local saint, the saint of the wood, the mountain or the spring; he trusts to the tutelary ceremonies that bring rain or sunshine, keep away drought or hail, protect the cattle against mysterious diseases. He ever conceives of religion as a contract between superior beings, who have a right to a fair share of masses and wax tapers, and man, who in return hopes for divine protection. In such a world, the preaching of a pure worship, a worship "in spirit and in truth," the doctrine of grace as the sole and necessary deliverer of the soul, could hardly prove successful. No wonder then if, in 1539, the peasants of the Limousin drove away the preachers with stones and forks, as if they had been werewolves, and if, in 1572, Aluigi Contarini could write, "The people that live in the country are almost all free from that plague."

But let us beware of exaggeration. Did not Florimond de Raemon point out, as amongst the first heretics, "even those who had never done aught but handle the plough?" As early as 1525, when the Archbishop of Paris complains to the Parliament that there are suspects in his diocese, he mentions "a ploughman, in a village near this town."¹ At the same date we find signalized as dissenters in Thiérache "day-laborers who had gone to France as harvestmen," *i. e.*, people of the lowest grade in the rural class, people who, living merely from day to day, had not profited by the fall in the price of land, because they could not buy any, and who formed, from that time, a kind of agricultural proletariat.

In the rural portions of Normandy, for unknown reasons, "Lutheranism" had spread so much that to one district of that province was given the name of "little Germany." That district probably consisted of the environs of Rouen, the Vexin and the land of, Caux, for we find after 1530² heretics at Anneville, at Sotteville, at Aumale and in every town and village of the neighborhood. At about the same time, a "protégé" of Marguerite d'Angoulême, the vicar Étienne Lecourt, evangelized the peasantry of Condé-sur-Sarthe. In Saintonge, about 1534, in an absolutely rural district, in the isles of Arvert, Oléron, Ré, many congregations sprang up, composed of fishermen and vinedressers. Here, as in a few other

¹ *Bull. du Protest.*, III. 28. The heretics, says he, are "gens de peu de savoir."

² *Bulletin*, 1887, p. 305.

districts, the countrymen showed their hostility against the Church by refusing to pay tithes ; thus a material interest binds them to the Reformation.

In the lists given by M. Weiss for 1545-1549 we find proof of the existence of a rural Protestantism.¹ Indeed if heresy had been merely an urban growth we should find mentioned in those rolls none but centres of some importance. But we encounter names of places which were then, and in some cases have remained until now, nothing but small villages or hamlets, in Orléanais, Nivernais, Blésois, Puisaye, etc. (taking into account only the territory of the Parliament of Paris). When six heretics were discovered at Héronville near Pontoise, others at Lécourt near Langres, others at Sallers, St. Martin de Valmeroux, "and other places in the mountains of Auvergne," when twenty-two men and five women are arrested in a locality so unimportant as St. Maixent in Poitou, it is hard to believe that there were no field-laborers among the victims whose occupation is not mentioned in the decrees of the court.

At the time when actual churches were organized we find many of them in villages, especially in the South. At St. Jean de Gardonnenque, in the diocese of Nîmes, the parish church is abandoned, divine service is discontinued, and the population crowds about the minister. In Agenais, where feudalism has remained more oppressive than elsewhere, the religious rising takes a form not unlike that of the "jacquerie," as in Germany.² In the neighborhood of Vitry in Champagne fifteen villages called for ministers from Geneva.

Besides a free and spontaneous spreading of rural heresy, another element, about 1560, becomes highly active, *i. e.*, the influence of the Protestant gentlemen-farmers. The landlord of La Ferté-Fresnel in Normandy writes to the church of Geneva, October 28, 1561 :³ "God has set me in authority over many men, and through these means one of the most superstitious districts of the realm will be gained to Christ." On his estates conversions have taken place by the hundreds, conversions by seigniorial decree. Therefore, although "this province has been the last to move," their church "is already well begun, and even bids fair to extend to fifteen or twenty leagues around." This "manorial" Protestantism spreads through "eight parishes around his castle." The success of the Reformation in the principalities of Bouillon and Montbéliard, in Béarn, and in the valleys of the Pyrenees was not unconnected with this very human element.

¹ *La Chambre Ardente.*

² Le Bourrilly in *Bull. du Protest.*, 1895, p. 597.

³ *Bull.*, 1897, p. 461.

In any case, rural Protestantism was more important than has been commonly thought. In the midst of religious wars we find rural churches in the South, chiefly in Languedoc and the Cévennes, in Champagne, in Saintonge, etc. Till the eve of the Revolution these congregations survived. While the town craftsman had emigrated early, the countryman remained obstinately fixed to the soil. For instance, in Auvergne (where, nevertheless, the Reformation was never predominant) Protestantism, in 1685, is essentially a religion of field-laborers.¹

Throughout France it was, until about 1560, a religion of poor folk. It was only at that date that, in the words of a young scholar,² "the political conduct of the Guises gave leaders to the Reformed." In order to counteract the influence of the Lorraine princes, a portion of the French nobility—the Condés, the Chastillons and their followers—rushed into political and religious opposition; the Huguenots of Faith became Huguenots of State. From that time the great Protestant stream was appropriated by the nobility. The democratic Protestantism of the towns emigrated to Holland, England and Germany, and the trades-unions fell under the sway of the religious brotherhoods, which excluded the non-Catholics and were soon to lead the revolutionary movement of the League.

If Protestantism did not completely succeed in taking root in France, the reason may be, that in the sixteenth century, owing to the social state of the time, it won more adherents among the workmen, a travelling and migratory class, than among the peasantry, which was the stable and permanent element of the nation.

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¹ See Archives Nationales, T. T., 251, 232, 261.

² M. Le Bourrilly.